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Clausewitz

and the Conduct of
US Military Operations in
the Persian Gulf War

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Clausewitz and the Conduct of
US Military Operations in
the Persian Gulf War

Carl Philipp Gottfried von Clausewitz would be proud. While certainly not perfect, US involvement in the Persian Gulf War was strategically successful, both militarily and politically. An analysis of this success demonstrates that we understood and appropriately applied Clausewitz's theory of the paradoxical trinity.

Clausewitz is probably best known for his statement that "war is nothing but the continuation of policy with other means."¹ Some it seems, especially politicians and pacifists, have challenged this statement on the basis that war is abhorrent and has no place in policy. I believe these challenges are mistaken. Clausewitz's statement neither glorifies nor advocates war. Rather, it simply states that war is a tool, and if used, it must be subordinated to a purpose other than violence. In other words, wars must never be fought for the sake of military objectives alone; indeed, military objectives must serve a political purpose toward the ensuing peace.

Clausewitz theorizes² that war is a phenomenon of three tendencies, forming a paradoxical trinity, affecting military operations. The three elements of this trinity are reason, the creative spirit, and a natural force. Clausewitz argues: the subordination of war to policy is subject to reason, and therefore principally the concern of government; the creative spirit, working within the play of chance and probability on the battlefield, is the arena of the commander and his army; and the blind, natural force composed of primordial violence, hatred and enmity, is embodied by the people. This is not to say that these elements reside solely in one area, but rather that they are

¹Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Michael Howard, Peter Paret (Princeton University Press, 1976) 69.

²Clausewitz, 89.

prominent in one area. The government, by virtue of relative safety can debate and reason appropriate discourse. The commander, faced with a relative lack of security and an ever changing flow of battle can be creative, acting quickly to seize an opportunity, to thwart imminent disaster, and to set up another series of actions. The passion of the people, which Clausewitz describes as primordial violence, hatred and enmity, is neither reasoned nor creative, but rather a base force, uncontrolled but not necessarily constant.

The three elements of the trinity are bonded by a force called "will." The will of each element affects each of the other elements. The will of the people, as demonstrated by their support (or lack of) has an impact on the reasoning, and therefore decisions, of the government and on the options of the commander. Similarly, the decisions of the government affect the passions of the people and the options of the commander, and the decisions of the commander affect the passions of the people and the decisions of the government. Clausewitz asserts that these three elements, bonded by will, affect the conduct of military operations.

The paradox of the trinity lies in the seeming contradictions between the pure logic of reason, the artistry of the creative spirit and the uncontrollable passion of primordial violence, hatred and enmity. In this paper I will explore each element of the trinity and examine its application to the conduct of US military operations in the Persian Gulf War.

Reason: Subordination of war to policy -- Government

As indicated, the subordination of war to policy ensures that war is only used to support the political goals desired in the subsequent peace. In November 1990, nearly two months before coalition forces initiated military actions against Iraq, President Bush listed four goals for a successful end to the conflict in the Persian Gulf. These goals are

political objectives in that they can be attained through a variety of means, not necessarily by military power. Notice that each goal identifies an end from which diplomatic intercourse can follow. President Bush's political objectives were:³

- Immediate, complete, and unconditional withdrawal of all Iraqi forces from Kuwait;
- Restoration of Kuwait's legitimate government;
- Security and stability of Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf; and
- Safety and protection of the lives of American citizens abroad.

Military objectives differ from political objectives in that military power is used to attain military objectives. The difference is predominantly one of use, not intent. As Clausewitz stated, though, proper military objectives must serve political ones. After receiving President Bush's political objectives, the military commander of coalition forces, General Schwarzkopf, determined the military objectives to be:⁴

- Neutralization of the Iraqi national command authority's ability to direct military operations;
- Ejection of Iraqi forces from Kuwait and destruction of Iraq's offensive threat to the region, including the Republican Guard in the Kuwait Theater of Operations;
- Destruction of known nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons production and delivery capabilities, to include Iraq's known ballistic missile program; and
- Assistance in the restoration of the legitimate government of Kuwait.

³George Bush, "Why We Are in the Gulf," Newsweek November 26, 1990: 28-29.

⁴Department of Defense, Conduct of the Persian Gulf Conflict: An Interim Report to Congress, July 1991, 1-1, 1-2.

Each of these military objectives supports President Bush's political objectives; and, with the exception of the last, each uses a descriptor such as "neutralize", "destroy" or "eject" that denotes a use of power uniquely military. That the last objective is not uniquely military does not mean that it is out of place. Along with combat power, the military has a host of capabilities that can assist governments. These capabilities include, but are not limited to, the accomplishment of engineer, police, medical, and civil affairs functions as well as advisement in each area.

Creative Spirit: Play of Chance and Probability -- Commander & Army

Clausewitz refers to the creative spirit, as the domain principally of the commander and his army. As the artist combines the science of mixing pigments to achieve desired colors with the art of the application of color to canvas, likewise it is the commander who must understand the science of movement, vision, and physical capacity while applying the art of maneuver, concealment and motivating soldiers. Much of war is scientific, technological, and thus somewhat predictable. However, just as the great artist applies color to canvas, producing results never before achieved; the commander's artistry is instrumental in producing victory. Unlike the artist, however, the commander applies his artistry to a continually changing canvas.

General Schwarzkopf's self-described 'Hail Mary' or 'end run' was undoubtedly a huge military success. He has been criticized, however, by a multitude of arm chair commanders for lacking originality. I think Clausewitz would scoff at these criticisms. Creativity requires neither bold nor original maneuver or attack, but rather uses available means to produce a better outcome. Just as the artist need not use a different medium, but can produce creative, original paintings using the same material countless others had used before.

The commander's first responsibility is to win the war on terms serving the political objectives. General Schwarzkopf did this. We could argue for a long time about the creativity of the 'Hail Mary,' but the fact remains that the Iraqis were fooled, thinking that the main attack would occur in Kuwait. The real creativity, I feel, is found in General Schwarzkopf's deception plan, a plan designed to make the Iraqis believe the main attack would come in Kuwait. Some of the elements of the deception plan that may well have helped Iraq believe that the attack would come through Kuwait were:

- Marines prepared for and practiced an amphibious assault during Operation Desert Shield, giving the impression that at least a portion of the attack would come from the sea.
- XVIII Airborne Corps and VII Corps were positioned in tactical assembly areas south of Kuwait until after the air war started and even then did not move to their forward assembly areas, further west, until just a few weeks before the ground attack.
- VII Corps units did not wear DCUs (Desert Camouflage Uniforms) until after the air war started. Because these soldiers were wearing the green BDUs (Battle Dress Uniforms), Iraqi sympathizers in Saudi Arabia could easily identify and pass on the location of VII Corps.
- When the air war began, many of the initial targets severed Iraqi communications, which prevented Iraq from receiving and passing information about the location of coalition forces.

The second most important responsibility of the commander is to preserve the national treasure. With US cities and population not in any direct jeopardy, the national treasure could rightly be defined as the fighting force: including the men and women, and the huge quantities of war-fighting equipment. General Schwarzkopf's prosecution of Desert Storm clearly succeeded in this regard. US losses were lower than even the most optimistic pre-war estimates.

Natural Force: Primordial Violence, Hatred, Enmity -- People

The third element of the trinity refers to the feelings toward the enemy. While Clausewitz uses the terms "Primordial Violence and Hatred," I feel these terms more aptly apply to total war as opposed to the limited objectives of the Persian Gulf War. Enmity, or the ill will one feels toward the enemy more closely applies. Clausewitz states that this element mainly concerns the people because the attitude of the people affects the type and conduct of military operations.

President Bush clearly understood the need for popular support while preparing for war as he garnered support through United Nations Resolution 678, Congressional authorization to use force, and by communicating directly with the people. Clausewitz, however, differentiates between preparing for war and the conduct of war. We see, here too, that President Bush and General Schwarzkopf were attuned to the need for continued public support. The same day that coalition forces began the air war, Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney and JCS Chairman General Powell conducted a nationally televised briefing, keeping the public informed. Televised daily briefings were soon seen and heard around the world. Both the Joint Staff in Washington DC, and CENTCOM Staff in Riyadh conducted these daily briefings.

The support for US troops was overwhelming. Packages containing gifts, and letters from the general public arrived in such huge quantities that mail deliveries were bogged down for weeks. Almost universally, these letters contained words of encouragement and support, if not for the war effort itself, then at least for the service members involved. This monumental support included many famous entertainers who recorded a song and video demonstrating their support for the troops.⁵ So strong was

⁵Voices That Care, directors, David S. Jack and Jim Yukich, song by, Linda Thompson Jenner, David Foster, and Peter Cetera, Warner Reprise Video, 1991.

the support from the American public that General Schwarzkopf gives credit for soldier sustainment to that support.⁶ Although the song, video, and majority of letters and packages were produced during the preparation for war, these were the public passions carried into battle with the soldiers and thus apply, in Clausewitzian terms, to the conduct of the war.

Conclusions

There is general agreement that the Persian Gulf War was a noteworthy military success, but not necessarily a strategic success. Each military objective was accomplished, and the war prosecuted in short order with few losses. There is debate that the military stopped too soon. Proponents of this position argue that the fighting should not have stopped until coalition forces defeated more Iraqi forces and/or Saddam Hussein.

I submit, though, that we were strategically successful since each political objective was accomplished.

- All Iraqi forces were unconditionally expelled from Kuwait;
- The legitimate government of Kuwait was restored to power;
- The security and stability of Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf were dramatically improved by the destruction of sufficient military forces that Iraq no longer could prosecute a war against its united neighbors. Additionally, world-wide economic and political sanctions against Iraq make it unlikely that she will soon regain that military capability;
- And, American citizens in Southwest Asia enjoy the same relative safety and protection enjoyed prior to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait,

In so doing, we gained worldwide prestige both politically and militarily.

⁶H. Norman Schwarzkopf and Peter Petre, It Doesn't Take A Hero (New York: Linda Grey Bantam Books, 1992) 379.

The war stopped when political objectives were met (further proof that it was subordinate to policy). I submit that further prosecution of hostilities would likely have made the operation a strategic failure. President Bush knew that the coalition was a fragile one, and that any action on our part that portrayed a desire beyond the scope of UN Resolution 678 would foment distrust among coalition partners. There was concern among Arab states that America's ultimate interests rested in exercising a long term control over them. Had President Bush continued prosecution of the war after Iraqi forces were expelled from Kuwait, our long-term interests in the region would likely have been jeopardized. For this reason Clausewitz would side with the cessation of hostilities. He believed that an expenditure of effort beyond the value of the political objective must be renounced,⁷ further asserting the subordination of war to policy.

Clausewitz would be proud. The United States led a clearly successful war effort, and in the prosecution thereof demonstrated an appreciation, understanding, and proper application of a theory he wrote over 130 years earlier.

⁷Clausewitz, 92.

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